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Double Dutch: two perspectives on the landscapes of first millennium BC Italy

Robert Witcher*

TESSE D. STEK. *Cult places and cultural change in Republican Italy: a contextual approach to religious aspects of rural society after the Roman conquest* (Amsterdam Archaeological Studies 14). xii+263 pages, numerous illustrations. 2009. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 978-90-8964-177-9 hardback €49.50.

P.A.J. ATTEMA, G.-J. BURGERS & P.M. VAN LEUSEN. *Regional pathways to complexity: settlement and land-use dynamics in early Italy from the Bronze Age to the Republican period* (Amsterdam Archaeological Studies 15). iv+235 pages, 81 b&w & colour illustrations. 2010. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press; 978-90-8964-276-9 hardback €55.



These two volumes represent successive issues in the Amsterdam University Press Archaeological Studies series. Although they represent the

culmination of quite different projects, both demonstrate distinctively Dutch approaches to the landscapes of first millennium BC Italy. Attema *et al.* is the outcome of a collaborative project (Regional Pathways to Complexity, hereafter RPC), and synthesises a longer Dutch tradition of archaeological fieldwork in Italy. The volume takes a comparative approach to centralisation and urbanisation during the first millennium BC using three case studies around the coast of central and southern Italy. Stek presents the results of his 2008 doctoral thesis on Republican sanctuary sites in central Italy. Focusing on the less urbanised upland interior, he concentrates on the incorporation of Italian communities into the expanding Roman state.

Cult places and cultural change in Republican Italy

The defining characteristic of the archaeology of upland central Italy during the Republican period is the sanctuary site. Stek argues that too often these sites are studied in isolation and he aims to re-establish their wider socio-economic context. His intention is to reconsider the role of sanctuaries in terms of the broader cultural developments which coincided with Roman expansion.

Stek establishes a clear position in the Romanisation debate: he rejects the top-down approach to cultural change which attributes all developments to Roman agency, particularly via colonisation; equally, he questions the argument for 'self-Romanisation' as the primary driver. Instead, he moves beyond the idea that cultural change can be measured on a gradient from non-Roman to Roman, arguing that the evidence must be read contextually. Importantly he stresses that continuity cannot be automatically accepted as evidence for the persistence of pre-Roman identity, just as change cannot be assumed to represent aspiration towards Roman identity.

Methodologically, Stek straddles two traditions, the theoretical emphasis of US and British scholarship and the detailed engagement with texts and material culture of the Italian tradition. The result is a wide-ranging re-evaluation of texts, inscriptions and material culture. His approach is to define distinct sub-debates, systematically reviewing the origins of consensus understanding, evaluating the evidence and positing alternatives. For example, examining the debate about the pre-Roman origins of the *vicus*, Stek observes that *vicus* is a juridical category and therefore cannot be equated with the village; this

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moves the debate firmly into the realm of texts. He concludes that the *vicus* was not a Samnite legacy, but rather a purely Roman concept. In turn, he reinterprets the sanctuaries associated with these *vici* as a means of negotiating 'new' community identities which are neither Samnite nor Roman. Repeatedly, Stek reveals that the force of accepted wisdom is underlain by ambiguous evidence and questionable assumptions, for example in relation to the form and location of Compitalia shrines (altars to Lares traditionally associated with crossroads). He accepts there is not always more evidence in support of his own interpretations, but nor does it disprove them either.

Stek's chapter 5 reports on a survey around the sanctuary of S Giovanni in Galdo (Molise) which reveals a network of associated sites. The author argues that the inhabitants of these sites formed the sanctuary's audience and that consequently sanctuaries were not isolated boundary markers but were central to their communities. Indeed, he suggests that sanctuaries may have existed within particularly dense clusters of settlement, though it is highly possible that the application of intensive survey in a control area would recognise similarly high levels of settlement.

Cult places and cultural change in Republican Italy provides a welcome contribution to the broader Romanisation debate and significantly expands understanding of Republican sanctuary sites. The author may not convince all scholars of every aspect of his thesis, for example that Republican sanctuaries were reinvented as Compitalia shrines, but his deconstruction of received wisdom unlocks fruitful new avenues of research.

Regional pathways to complexity

RPC presents the results of an ambitious collaborative project by scholars from Amsterdam and Groningen, itself building upon decades of earlier research by scholars from the Netherlands. Whilst engaging thoroughly with wider scholarship, the result therefore presents a distinctively Dutch perspective. The volume compares centralisation and urbanisation during the first millennium BC in three study areas: the Pontine region in southern Lazio, Sibaritide in Calabria and the Salento isthmus in Apulia. For each, the project collated existing archaeological data and identified problems which were addressed through targeted fieldwork. Each presents specific issues in

terms of data quality and historical questions, but each contributes to the broader themes.

Chapters 2–4 address the study areas individually, while chapters 5–8 take a comparative approach to proto-urbanisation in the Bronze and Iron Ages, Greek-indigenous encounters, urbanisation during the Archaic period, and Roman expansion. In each case, it is clear that social complexity was emergent long before the arrival of Greek or Roman colonists and that, when these outsiders did arrive, they were not as militarily or culturally dominant as often believed. These comparative chapters draw attention to the variable chronology and character of socio-economic development and emphasise distinctive local trajectories and the differential impact of colonisation. The emphasis is on multiple rather than monocausal explanations. For example, the proliferation of small rural sites during the Hellenistic period is frequently linked to Roman expansion; but, as Terrenato (2008) has observed, in many areas this process pre-dates Roman conquest. RPC therefore considers regional explanations for the spread of rural settlement stressing differences in demography, agriculture and social relations. This dispersal of small rural sites is also noted in Stek's study area, and more generally around the Punic West and Greek East; RPC therefore raises questions about the explanation of apparently singular phenomena experienced simultaneously across vast and diverse areas.

Collating varied data into a single GIS database is complex and time-consuming and the project deserves praise for its rigorous approach. Critical evaluation of data is an issue for any archaeological project, but is particularly important when using legacy data (i.e. data derived from a variety of former survey projects). RPC's long-term and comparative approach highlights the inevitable inconsistencies of its component datasets. There is no magic bullet — or GIS algorithm — to eliminate such unevenness and much attention is dedicated to considerations of bias and reliability. The team admits that it has not resolved all methodological issues and, in this context, it is noticeable that there are few attempts to visualise multiple legacy datasets. Indeed, the team stress the need to compare interpretations rather than supposedly 'raw data'. This is sensible given that composite maps can be highly misleading and often better reflect the history of archaeological research than past settlement patterns (Witcher 2008); conversely, given the importance of

spatial analysis to the project's aims, some alternative attempts at visualising data would have been welcome. This volume's wide chronological scope and its inclusion of three important regions means that it contains material which will be of interest to a range of period and regional specialists; such readers are advised to look beyond their areas of expertise and to consider some of the wider implications raised by the project's comparative methodology.

Assigning agency

Despite their similar subject matter, there are differences of approach between these two volumes. For example, Stek focuses on one site category across a few centuries, whilst RPC considers wider settlement processes across a millennium. As a result, Stek is more detailed in his approach, especially with regard to the range of relevant data (e.g. textual, epigraphic, material); by contrast, what RPC inevitably lacks in detail, it recoups through the development of its original and stimulating comparative approach.

A key aim of both volumes is to challenge the dominant explanation of cultural change. The RPC reacts to the colonialist reliance on exogenous factors, primarily Greek and Roman colonisation, to explain cultural change. The project's identification of pre-colonial social complexity leads RPC to stress the endogenous nature of these developments. In contrast, Stek addresses a trend whereby the role of Rome has been diminished, with agency transferred to indigenous Italian populations (hence, 'self-Romanisation'). He attributes this trend to post-colonialism, though, equally, Italian regionalism encourages close attention to pre-Roman peoples and their cultural persistence, reducing Rome to a 'vener'. Either way, Stek's review of the evidence finds little support for the idea that *vici* and their associated sanctuaries were pre-Roman; instead, he argues for an active role played by Rome in the creation of 'new' communities. His clearly articulated point is that Roman influence need not mean 'becoming Roman'.

Hence, crudely, the RPC challenges colonialist assumptions about the primacy of exogenous explanations for cultural change, whilst Stek challenges post-colonial attempts to promote indigenous agency (though it should be stressed that both reject any simple dichotomies). It is therefore tempting to ask what the RPC project would have concluded about Stek's research area if it had been selected as a fourth case study — an upland landscape in central Italy with few towns as a control for the more urbanised coast. Would RPC have assigned cultural change to endogenous developments as it did in the coastal study areas or would it have concurred with Stek and attributed a significant role to Rome in the region's cultural transformation? Of course much depends on the evidence deployed and Stek's argument hinges on his detailed engagement with the epigraphic evidence. In other words, we might suspect that the RPC's settlement-based approach would have come to rather different conclusions. This is to not argue that one approach is superior; rather it emphasises that the selection of study area, data and theoretical framework all exert a strong influence on interpretation.

Despite their quite different approaches and conclusions, both volumes can be characterised as distinctively Dutch: Stek's through its author's intermediary position between US/British and Italian scholarship and RPC through its primary focus on 30 years of Dutch fieldwork. The consecutive publication of a doctoral thesis and a work of mature synthesis draws attention to the rich heritage of Dutch archaeological fieldwork in Italy and points to its continued vitality in the future.

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